

Big-hearted novel brings small-town Prairie residents to life, B3

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# BOOKS

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Warts-and-all history debunks myths about the Tudors, B4



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THE OTTAWA CITIZEN, SECTION B

# The fall OF WARSAW



PHOTO ABOVE FROM THE COLLECTION OF STEFAN MUCHA; MERMAID BELOW FROM THE COVER OF THE MERMAID AND THE MESSERSCHMITT BY RULKA LANGER

'God Thou Holy ... have mercy on us. From hunger, fear and war ... deliver us. From sudden death ... save us.' God did not answer, Rulka Langer writes, the German artillery did.



### In town

The Polish Embassy presents a reading and discussion of Rulka Langer's *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt* featuring Terry Tegnazian, Los Angeles-based publisher of Aquila Polonica. Tegnazian will also screen Aquila Polonica's new DVD, *Siege*, a rarely seen Academy Award-nominated newsreel shot during the German attack on Warsaw in September 1939. April 9 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the embassy, 443 Daly Ave. Admission is free. RSVP by April 7, at 613-789-0468 ext. 34 or e-mail rafal.domisiewicz@msz.gov.pl

The mermaid, below, has for centuries been a symbol of the defence of Warsaw. She was helpless to stop the destruction and occupation of the city.

## Gripping memoir brings home horrors of war



**The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt: War Through a Woman's Eyes 1939-1940**

By Rulka Langer  
Aquila Polonica, \$35.95

BY IRENE TOMASZEWSKI

It's the summer of 1939 and Rulka Langer's holiday in the country is cut short. The telegram from her Warsaw office reads: "Situation grave. Advise immediate return."

The threat of war has dominated all conversations for months and Langer had joked that her holiday was in a race against the war. "Dammit, Hitler won," she says, more annoyed than alarmed. She still prefers to think Hitler is bluffing

or, at worst, the hostilities will end quickly and put Hitler in his place.

Langer, a graduate of prestigious Vassar College in the U.S., the mother of two young children and a successful career woman at the Bank of Poland, is winding up some business matters before joining her husband in Washington where he has gone to work in the Polish embassy. One could say, "She has it all," and she knows it.

Strong-willed, independent and savvy — like her mother and grandmother before her — Langer's personality comes through in her memoir. Her adrenalin-charged account of Germany's attack on Poland, the siege of Warsaw and the subsequent Nazi occupation is marked by unsparring candour and flashes of humour.

Written just months after she escaped in 1940 to the United States with her children, the story has an immediacy that no later memoir can ever capture as Langer describes the day-by-day, night-by-night drama of civilians trapped by that most obscene of crimes: war.

*The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt*, originally published in the U.S. in 1942, has been reissued by Aquila Polonica, a publisher that specializes in books by Polish authors. The mermaid in the title has been the symbol of Warsaw for centuries, brandishing a sword and shield in defence of the city. This new edition contains Second World War photos of Warsaw, as well as photographs of Langer and her family and an epilogue by her son, George. Langer died in 1993.

The start of the war is, Langer explains in her memoir, in a way, a relief for the citizens of Warsaw; it breaks the tension. People get busy taping up windows, volunteering for the war effort, and spirits are high. But the news is disquieting; this war is different.

Towns, villages are bombed, set aflame. Low-flying planes strafe civilians with machine-guns. Within days, the roads are filled with refugees; homeless, they come to Warsaw seeking shelter.

Then Warsaw is bombed. The people wonder — why residential areas? Why hospitals? Another wave of refugees flees Warsaw to the east.

The people take flight, but where can they go? And how?

See WARSAW on PAGE B2

# Warsaw: Siege bad, occupation worse

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Fine for a single man but not for women and children. "They start on their way decently enough in automobiles or horse drawn carts, with suitcases," Langer writes. "But then they run out of gas ... they have to continue on foot. They have to leave suitcases behind and within days they are tramps, hungry, exhausted, sick, exposed, prey for the bombers and the machine-guns." Stunned, their faces are masks of tragedy.

Langer too flees Warsaw but soon realizes there is no safety anywhere — the Soviets have attacked from the east. She, her mother and her children head back to Warsaw, desperate for home.

Home no longer has gas, cut off for fear of explosions. They shrug it off. The bombing continues. After a while the electricity goes. How many candles are left? The windows are blown out; the nights are cold.

Yet life continues. Shops, newsboys, telephones. Food supplies run out and, despite the danger, people go out in search of food. At first, they share information. You can get rice here, flour somewhere else. This one has bread, another has potatoes. In the long queues, they cheer one another up.

But as the struggle for food gets more desperate, human decency is forgotten. "Hunger is a bad master," Langer notes.

Bombs or no bombs, hunger stalks, the search for food continues. Langer sees a gutted house, enters and looks around for food, for candles. Then shock, as she realizes she's "a looter." Clutching a few tins of food, she runs home past the makeshift graves that now fill not only the parks but medians and sidewalks.

Buildings collapse, fires rage, the siege continues. For all their love of

home, the family finally decides to go to an air raid shelter. They run through the streets, past walls of fire, the noise deafening. Langer is holding three-year-old Ania's hand, running. Ania always liked that game, running holding her mother's hand. Does she realize she's now running for her life?

They reach the shelter. She can't see eight-year-old George and screams for him. Someone tells her to stop being hysterical, it doesn't help. She finds her son, calms down and realizes there is, in fact, a hush in the shelter. Even the children are quiet.

Her mother. Where's her mother? The street is a wall of flames. She must go find her mother and yet she can't move. "I learned what mortal fear can do," she admits, as she realizes that she doesn't want to go out looking for her mother. But she does, and finds her.

Langer marvels at what people endure in extreme circumstances, and how they change. People she always thought were strong fall apart; others who seemed timid become heroes. Some go mad. "Don't lose your heads, ladies," a well-dressed elderly gentleman keeps repeating, clearly having lost his.

Finally, the bombs destroy the water supply. Along with the raging fires there will now be raging epidemics. In the midst of the siege, Langer goes to a church packed with people. "God Thou Holy ... have mercy on us. From hunger, fear and war ... deliver us. From sudden death ... save us." God did not answer, she writes, the German artillery did. "It was too much. I couldn't stand it. I was crying. It made me totally ashamed."

The siege ends and the occupation begins. It is worse, according to Langer. At least the bombs were impersonal but face-to-face arrogance



FROM THE COLLECTION OF ZYGMUNT WALKOWSKI

Children at makeshift graves on the sidewalks in Warsaw.

and cruelty are harder to bear, and there is no respite. The family, and those around them, live with constant terror and humiliation, drawing on unexpected courage and ingenuity to survive.

When an American visa finally arrives, Langer fails to get the necessary approval from the Gestapo. Packing up her children, she takes her chances and successfully boards a train for Genoa and an American ship. She has no choice but to leave her mother behind.

Life will never be the same again, for Langer or for anyone else in Poland. The book ends with a moving afterword by Langer, first published in a U.S. magazine in Decem-

ber, 1942, and the epilogue by her son, George, where we learn that Langer's mother died during the war, apparently of natural causes. Other family members, especially those on the paternal Jewish side, died in camps, or through other acts of violence. In war, there are few happy endings.

**Irene Tomaszewski's** book, *Codename Zegota: Rescuing Jews in Occupied Poland, The Most Dangerous Conspiracy in Wartime Europe*, co-authored with Teczka Werbowski, is scheduled for publication in May by Praeger, a Division of Greenwood Publishing Group. She lives in Hudson, Que.